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Title : Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release of a Wild Orphaned Killer Whale - Health Assessment

Category : Conservation

Student :

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Abstract : The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) in cooperation with Fisheries and Oceans - Canada, the Vancouver Aquarium and numerous advocacy groups in Washington State and British Columbia rescued, rehabilitated and released a lone two-year old orphaned female juvenile killer whale (*Orcinus orca* - A73) in the Pacific Northwest. She was first reported in November 2001 in Puget Sound and scientists observed her over several months during the Spring of 2002 reporting that she appeared underweight, had a ketotic odor to her breath, and was suffering from a dermatological disease of unknown origin. Based on concerns for her health and welfare, NOAA Fisheries assembled a team of experienced researchers, husbandry personnel and veterinarians to rescue, assess, and rehabilitate the whale. The health assessment was based on a risk assessment approach designed to characterize the risk to wild populations of killer whales following treatment and release of A73. The medical team initiated the health assessment in situ prior to capture and conducted intense diagnostic tests and behavioral observations throughout her rehabilitation. Such tests included complete physical exams, serial blood chemistries and infectious disease screening, respiratory gas analysis, chemical analysis of blood and blubber, dermatology and immune function. Upon examination, she was found to have a mild gastrointestinal parasitic infection and erysipelotheix infection. After one month of rehabilitation, A 73 was medically cleared and transported to Hanson Island, British Columbia for reintroduction near her natal summer range. Within 24 hours following her arrival to Hanson Island, she was released to join nearby killer whales. Scientists monitored her via telemetry and visual observations over the next several weeks. This is the first time that an orphaned orca has been successfully rehabilitated and released in North America. The in-depth health assessment of this whale provided unique insights into pathogen exposure and health of free-ranging killer whales.